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RUEHBJ/AMEMBASSY BEIJING 3848
RUEHKO/AMEMBASSY TOKYO 3707
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RUEAIIA/CIA WASHDC
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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 ASHGABAT 000117

SIPDIS

STATE FOR SCA/CEN, PPD

E.O. 12958: DECL: 01/25/2020

TAGS: [PREL](#) [PHUM](#) [SOCI](#) [TX](#)

SUBJECT: TURKMENISTAN: FREE AT LAST -- TASP STUDENTS ABLE
TO EXIT

REF: A. 09 ASHGABAT 1662

[1](#)B. 09 ASHGABAT 1671

[1](#)C. 09 ASHGABAT 1170

Classified By: Charge Sylvia Reed Curran for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

[1](#)1. (C) SUMMARY: The Turkmen American Scholarship Program students, who had been prevented since July 2009 from leaving the country for any reason, simply because they either had been enrolled at or planned to enroll at the American University in Central Asia, are now free to leave Turkmenistan. The first group left on January 23 and the last student should leave by February 1. Only the Deputy Chairman who puts a person's name on the travel blacklist can remove it. Deputy Chairman Saparlyev would have been happy to have left the students on the travel blacklist for years. Therefore, it took a Foreign Minister, who finally felt himself strong enough to push back against another Deputy Chairman and was convinced the issue was souring bilateral relations, to get Saparlyev to act to remove the travel ban.
END SUMMARY.

[1](#)2. (C) On January 23 and 24, the first two groups of Turkmen American Scholarship Program (TASP) students were able to depart for studies at the American University of Bulgaria. These students had been on a blacklist that prevented them from leaving the country for any reason since July 2009. The next group is scheduled to depart January 27, with the final student, hopefully, on a plane on February 1.

[1](#)3. (C) The one hiccup happened when one student who tried to leave on January 24 was prevented from going. The student surmised that his problem stemmed from the fact that he had once been in a rap group. Officials told group members to disband as rap music was "unTurkmen." Other band members have also been unable to leave the country. Nevertheless, shortly after the student was turned away at the airport, a Ministry of Education official called ACCELS to apologize for the mistake and say that the student was really free to go.

[1](#)4. (C) We seemed to be approaching resolution over the past month. During a December 25 meeting with Foreign Minister Rashid Meredov, Charge emphasized the need to solve this issue, because it was casting a pall on the bilateral

relationship (Ref A). Meredov promised to discuss the matter with Deputy Chairman Hydyr Saparlyev, who is responsible for education. When Charge next saw Saparlyev on December 29, the Deputy Chairman said that the student issue would be solved in January (Ref B). Then, Charge raised TASP January 19 with an MFA official on the margins of another meeting and pointed out that Saparlyev had said the matter would be solved in January, and we are now in January. She also said that Washington was upset with the lack of resolution.

15. (C) A few hours after that conversation, PAO received a call from Ministry of Education International Department head Nury Bayramov, who asked for a list of students going to study in Bulgaria. Bayramov told PAO three times that once Ministry of Education received the fax, he personally would pass it to the "services," and the students would be able to leave as early as the next day. However, it took several days to get the students' name off the list (or more likely to produce a waiver to travel now), a process that Bayramov explained was complicated (septel).

16. (C) COMMENT: Why were the students blocked from traveling in the first place? In Turkmenistan, the President is the ultimate decision maker. However, not every decision reaches his level. Often times, Deputy Chairmen will sometimes make decisions not based on a presidential order but rather based on what is in line with the President's wishes. In this case, the President opposed Turkmen studying in Kyrgyzstan and wanted the Education complex to exercise better control over students studying abroad. Saparlyev, who is not a fan of study abroad and detests many U.S. exchange programs, put

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the names of Turkmen students studying at the American University of Central Asia (AUCA) on the travel blacklist. Saparlyev has never liked TASP, and so this worked out well for him. Once your name is on the blacklist, the relevant Deputy Chairman has to ask to have it removed.

17. (C) COMMENT CONTINUED: We were finally able to get the students off the blacklist when, Meredov, after spending much of last year under a cloud (Ref C), was once again in the President's good graces and felt himself strong enough to push another Deputy Chairman. And once convinced this really was a hindrance to U.S.-Turkmen relations, he pushed Saparlyev to do the right thing.

18. (C) COMMENT CONTINUED: One interesting thing we learned from the students' departure is that one can be on multiple travel blacklists. That, apparently, was the problem with our rapper student. He was on both the former AUCA blacklist and the one for his rap group. So, it took an extra step to make sure he could travel. END COMMENT.
CURRAN